



What College Students Learn About Terrorism: A Case Study of IR Textbooks

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Terrorism is a strategy to weaken a hated political authority. It is a security threat, but almost the opposite of the nuclear one: little pinpricks instead of a huge bang.

Last winter when the shock of 9/11 was drawing down, I decided to peruse the IR textbooks on my home and office shelves. “What would students learn,” I asked, “if they consulted any of these texts in order to make sense out of the events that so shocked the nation?” What I found in reading these works was in most cases simply appalling— and I consulted not one or two, but ten in all — ten textbooks published by such major houses as Addison-Wesley, Dushkin/McGraw Hill, Harcourt Brace, Longman, McGraw Hill, Prentice Hall, Simon and Schuster, and W. W. Norton (and listed at the end of this essay).

What I found were sloppy definitions, specious moral equivalencies, the uncritical perpetuation of myths about terrorism, descriptive unanalytical filler, superficiality, and banality.

What Is Terrorism?

On this rather simple question, no consensus exists among these texts. Some define terrorism so broadly as to make it indistinguishable from any use of force. For example, does it serve any purpose to define terrorism as “seeking to further political objectives through the threat or use of violence usually in opposition to state governments?” (Kegley and Wittkopf, p. 222) or “the use of violence to achieve a political objective” (Papp, p. 127). What would not be considered terrorism under these definitions? Does it make sense to throw coercive diplomacy and conventional war into the same bucket as terrorism?

Sure it does, if one is seeking to create moral equivalencies between terrorists and their victims. As one author writes, “... defining terrorism is a difficult task.” “Indeed,” the author continues, “several countries throughout the world consider the United States, several Western European states, and Israel as undertaking terrorist actions” (Papp, p. 14).

Moral Equivalencies

While all of the texts make a stab at defining terrorism, we quickly learn from the vast majority of them that terrorism lies largely in the eyes of the beholder. Almost all, in fact, trot out uncritically the cliché that one “person’s” terrorist is another “person’s” freedom fighter. One text makes this point four times in about eight pages devoted to the subject. Even a six-line description of the Terrorism Research Center’s website contains a warning to students that in looking at “terrorist profiles and the Definition of Terrorism controversy, [k]eep in mind that one group’s ‘freedom fighters’ may be another group’s ‘terrorists’” (Kegley and Wittkopf, p. 241). Four warnings in eight pages.

If students learn only one thing from most of these texts it is this: While no one really knows what terrorism is, whatever it is, we are one, as well. Consider the following examples:

To a great extent, whether an organization is defined as a terrorist group or not depends on one's perspective. When seen from an American perspective, the "Indians" of the Boston Tea Party were American nationalists making a political point: when seen from a British perspective, they were terrorists destroying property and endangering life (Papp, p. 127).

Pressure to respond to [random acts of terrorism] is very strong because people worry disproportionately about terrorism, even though it kills a relatively small number of people. Despite better devices for protection, committed individuals or groups of terrorists are difficult to deter. As the well-known phrase puts it, one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter (Mingst, p. 179).

It is easy to condemn such [terrorist] activities when they are conducted by countries or groups with which you disapprove. What about assassination and other such actions by a country with which you may have sympathy? ... Those who question the legitimacy of such acts [Reagan's strike against Qaddafi and Clinton's strikes in Somalia and Afghanistan] argue that what constitutes terrorism is often in the eye of the beholder and, in this case, killing civilians with a bomb dropped on a building by a warplane is no different than (sic) killing civilians by planting a bomb in a building (Rourke, pp. 346-47)

As the last quotation indicates, some authors hedge their equations of moral equivalency in a veil of specious objectivity through attributions to often unnamed "some" or "observers." Consider the following from the author last quoted: "It should be noted that in the view of some, the way that the United States and some other militarily powerful countries define terrorism is self-serving" (Rourke, p. 347).

And who are the "some?" Well, in this case, one of the "somes" is none other than Osama bin Laden. According to the author, "Osama bin Laden, who allegedly masterminded the attacks on the US embassy in Kenya and Tanzania in 1988, charges that, 'American history does not distinguish between civilians and military, and not even women and children. [Americans] are the ones who used the [atomic] bombs against the Japanese'" (Rourke, p. 347).

While it's one thing to point out that people use the term terrorist in self-serving and indiscriminate ways, it's quite another to throw up one's hands at defining what terrorism is. Clearly, we know what contemporary terrorism is: it is a strategy that explicitly targets innocent civilians. Thus, America's retaliation against Qaddafi for the Berlin disco bombing was not an act of terrorism, as terrifying as that response may have been and as tragic as the civilian deaths may have been. The target in those attacks was not innocent civilians but the perpetuator and root of the terrorist campaign.

To label as "terrorist" any violent action that results in civilian deaths makes any effort to classify the uses of force impossible. Neither ends nor consequences but means defines terrorism. Terrorism used in a good cause is terrorism, nonetheless, and even the best of good causes can never make terrorism good or moral as Michael Walzer pointed out in his book "Just and Unjust Wars" over twenty years ago. Using random and horrific acts of violence against unsuspecting and innocent non-combatants is terrorism, and moral people will condemn such acts no matter who undertakes them.

The Perpetuation of Myth

Rather than engaging in what Charles Hyneman once termed, "the rigorous examination of ideas," too many of these political scientists merely pass on and legitimize egregiously shallow and uncritical thinking. For example, one of the most simplistic myths perpetuated by almost all of these texts is the portrayal of terrorists as powerless, despair-driven people— "the international homeless," as one set of authors put it. Terrorism, we are told, is "usually used by the powerless against the powerful" (Mingst, p. 178); it is "the strategy of the weak for weakening the strong" (Roskin and Berry, p. 4). "Terrorist groups," according to another text, "seek the political freedom, privilege, and property they think persecution has denied them" (Kegley and Wittkopf, p. 222). Somewhat strangely, the authors of this last assertion devote their first case study to "international organized crime," which they claim is "one increasingly active

Obviously, most terrorists do not have the military capabilities of the parties against whom they wage war; however, military asymmetry by itself does not mean that terrorist groups are powerless, weak, or even poor. Hizbollah, Hamas, and Al Qaeda— even when these books were written— could not be considered groups comprised of the uneducated, “great unwashed.” Al Qaeda is as well financed as any terrorist organization can be, and its leaders and many of its minions are or have been well educated. Moreover, to say that members of terrorist organizations are powerless implicitly accepts and legitimizes their rejection of normal and peaceful measures for settling differences. Hamas and Hizbollah do not want a settlement with Israel; they want Israelis expunged from the Middle East. Timothy McVeigh was not seeking to argue his case in the American political arena; he wanted to destroy that very arena.

But the more important myth lies on the other side of the equation— that the targets of terrorism are “the powerful.” As Walter Laqueur pointed out almost thirty years ago, terrorism rarely occurs in powerful countries such as Iraq, Syria, North Korea, the Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or even in Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban. Since the end of the Second World War, the targets of terrorism have been concentrated in permissive democracies such as the United States, Great Britain, and the Western European social democracies or soft authoritarian regimes such as Egypt and Algeria. Truly powerful and totalitarian regimes never have a problem with terrorists.

Terrorism as a Strategy: Effective or Not?

Assessments of whether terrorism is a successful strategy for groups seeking change is seldom undertaken in these texts, and when it is done, the efforts are usually superficial. Moreover, among the texts, the conclusions are contradictory, reflecting, perhaps, the state of the discipline. Consider the following three assessments:

In the end, terrorism like most forms of violence, exists because terror tactics sometimes do accomplish their goals. However much one may condemn the acts themselves, it is also accurate to say that over the years Palestinian terrorists almost certainly played a role in increasing the willingness of Israel to deal with them, in enhancing the global awareness of and concern with the Palestinian cause, and in bringing pressure on Israel by the international community to reach an agreement with them (Rorke, p. 350).

Does terrorism work? Rarely and seldom alone... . In most cases, however, and especially after innocent civilians have been killed by terrorists bombs, it just stiffens the resolve of the target country. No amount of Palestinian terrorism, for example, can persuade Israel to go out of business (Roskin and Berry, No. 5, p. 199).

[I]t is safe to conclude that the activity of most terrorist nonstate actors are undermining the authority and sovereignty of legitimate existing states (Kegley and Wittkopf, p. 225).

While terrorists have wrought havoc, they have seldom succeeded in gaining major goals unless their activities were part of a larger military or political strategy. North Vietnam engaged in the systematic assassination of over 9,000 South Vietnamese village officials in the early 1960s, and even though this terrorist campaign was enveloped in a large-scale guerrilla war, the North Vietnamese were still unable to defeat the South Vietnamese. In the end, it took a conventional military invasion of South Vietnam to do the job. Had the U.S. Congress not refused to re-supply South Vietnamese forces and permitted the use of American air power to resist that invasion, South Vietnam might have endured.

As for the Palestinian terrorists, the success of Yasir Arafat has had much more to do with western dependence on Arab oil than upon the terrorist tactics of the PLO, Hamas, or Hizbollah. Were Israel located elsewhere, American news channels and newspapers would be giving about as much attention to the PLO as they now give to the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the terrorist violence in Indian-controlled portions of Kashmir.

The Absence of Critical Assessments

Most of the texts have little to say about strategies to combat terrorism, and few make critical assessments of various counter-measures. Rare are attempts to classify different kinds of terrorists, undertake a comparative analysis of strategies and tactics, assess unilateral and multilateral countermeasures, and discuss success rates. For example, one text's conclusion consisted of the following:

In the aftermath of a number of such high-profile cases, the international community responded by signing a series of international agreements designed to tighten airports security, sanction states that accepted hijackers, and condemn state-supported terrorism. The International Convention against the Taking of Hostages is a prominent example of such an agreement (Mingst, p. 178).

And that was it. No assessment. No critical discussion.

Terrorism and the Future?

From reading these texts, it is not even clear whether terrorism is a significant problem, although most do predict its persistence and, in several cases, authors dangle truly apocalyptic scenarios in which we, in the democracies, stand helpless and, presumably, hopeless. However, consider the following two assessments— drawn from the same database and scholarly literature:

Given the nature of the problem and the draconian methods that would probably be required to eliminate it, it is likely that terrorism will be with the international community for the foreseeable future (Papp, p. 129).

Terrorism, despite occasional outbursts, is in decline. The same forces that are reshaping international relations in other areas are also reducing terrorist violence. The end of the Cold War brought about major power cooperation. This removed the target for many ideological terrorists groups... . In addition, the worldwide rise of democracy has reduced domestic terrorism directed against repressive regimes (Roskin and Berry, 1999 ed., p. 252).

Banalities

What do I mean by “banalities”? Consider the following gratuitous and vacuous statements:

Terrorists are non-state actors (Mingst, p. 178).

Terrorism is group activity (Roskin and Berry, 1999 ed., p. 253).

Terrorism has come of age (Papp, p. 443).

Targets, too, have become diverse; today they include buses, large buildings (New York's World Trade Center) and tenements (in India and Germany) (Mingst, p. 179).

Terrorists are not crazy ‘Dr. Evils.’ They pursue their political goals by deplorable means because that is often the only way open to them (Roskin and Berry, 2002 ed., p. 199).

Ordinarily, the death and destruction caused by terrorism are limited, at least in comparison with the death and destruction caused by war (Papp, p. 128).

From a section entitled “Who Are the Actors in World Politics”:

In recent years another type of individual has had a significant impact on world politics: terrorists. Examples of such are Abu Nidal and Osama bin laden who have become commonly known because of their sponsorship and involvement in terrorism (Caldwell, p. 56).

In a box entitled “Do you know that?,” we learn that:

“[t]he name of the militant, many would say terrorist, Middle East Group, Hamas, is an acronym for the Arabic words for Islamic Resistance Movement and means 'zeal'” (Rourke, p. 347).

Who wouldn't want to know that?

But in terms of banalities, the prize must surely go to the authors who presented students with the following list of "Five ways to reduce international terrorism:"

- (1) Avoid wars. Avoid making enemies by avoiding threats and child-killing economic sanctions in foreign policy. Stabilize deterrence through arms control and confidence building agreements. Use diplomacy vigorously.
- (2) Free colonies, whether the colony is called the West Bank or Ulster.
- (3) Avoid oppressing one's own people or occupying other nations.
- (4) Avoid making or propping up hated governments or unarming popular ones.
- (5) Try to avoid extreme measures in dealing with an extremist domestic opposition; too tough countermeasures only make things worse (Roskin and Berry, 1999 ed., p. 269)

To be fair, this list, which appeared in the 1999 edition of this text, was gone in the 2002 edition because the entire subject of terrorism was condensed from one chapter to a box because, presumably, the authors believe that terrorism would disappear in an evolving post-Cold War and increasingly democratic age. Now that the big bang occurred on 9/11, the box in this edition will, most likely, be enlarged to a full chapter in the 2003 edition along with the list of pitfalls just cited.

Not All Is Bleak

Two out of the ten books stand out as models of scholarly treatment. In five-and-a-half pages, David Ziegler does a superb job in eviscerating cant and politically correct cliches, and making the scholarly literature accessible to students in a well-organized fashion. His presentation in *War, Peace, and International Politics* presents meaningful distinctions and categories and contains a balanced discussion of dealing with terrorism. He even discusses the difficulties in devising measures for counting terrorist events.

Similarly, one can find an excellent discussion of terrorism in Frederic S. Pearson and J. Martin Rochester's *International Relations: The Global Condition in the Twenty-First Century*. Pearson and Rochester present a wealth of relevant information and draw well on the scholarly literature. In addition, they also eviscerate many of the cliches that pass as profundity in other texts. For the cliché that “one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter,” they reply, “[If that is to be accepted], then any act of violence can be excused and legitimized so long as someone invents a justification ” (p. 448). Similarly, they write that, “although some have called the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima in 1945 an act of terrorism— because it represents to them seemingly indiscriminate violence against innocent civilians— this is more accurately designated an act of interstate warfare” (p. 450). Finally, their critical discussion of the strategies for dealing with terrorists is about as well done as one could find without delving into the body of scholarly literature itself.

What Does the “Higher” Mean in Higher Education?

But these two texts are the exceptions rather than the rule. While most of the works surveyed do cite solid scholarly works on terrorism in their bibliographies, very little of the knowledge in those books makes its way into their discussions of the subject! Many of the myths about terrorism that Walter Laqueur debunked over twenty-five years

Sadly, discussions of terrorism in most of today's IR textbooks amount to melodramatic or sensational introductions, portraits of different kinds of terrorists, descriptive case studies, and superficial assessments about the future — all low-level, unanalytical, and simplistic stuff. What is also dismaying about these texts is what they reveal about the state of the discipline. In fact, reading most of these texts quickly leads one to wonder what the “higher” in higher education means at the nation's colleges and universities.

Texts Reviewed

Caldwell, Dan, *World Politics and You* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000). Subject not covered.

Duncan, W. Raymond, Barbara Jancar-Webster, and Bob Switky, *World Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: Addison- Wesley/Longman Inc., 2002).

Kegley, Jr., Charles and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (Bedford: St. Martins, 2001).

Mingst, Karen, *Essentials of International Relations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, second edition).

Papp, Daniel S., *Contemporary International Relations: Frameworks for Understanding* (New York: Longman, 2002, sixth edition).

Pearson, Fredric S. and J. Martin Rochester, *International Relations: The Global Condition in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997, fourth edition).

Roskin, Michael G. and Nicholas O. Berry, *IR: The New World of International Relations* (Upper Addle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999, fourth edition).

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Rourke, John T., *International Politics on the World Stage* (Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1999, seventh edition).

Ziegler, David, *War, Peace, and International Politics* (New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 2000).

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